

BIRMINGHAM (March 16) - Congressman Spencer Bachus said Alabama's approach of "working together" is making the state an attractive location for employers.

Bachus noted the following economic success story reported in the Mobile Press-Register on March 15, 2012.

### **Thomasville mayor building economy on metal**

By [Dan Murtaugh, Press-Register](#) Press-Register

THOMASVILLE, Ala. -- This town of less than 5,000 is 15 miles from the closest river and more than 50 miles from the closest interstate. It's also one of the hottest spots for economic development in the state.

In the past two years, the city has lured pipemaker Lakeside Steel, steel supplier Metals USA and copper maker Golden Dragon near its part of northeast Clarke County, in addition to a number of smaller suppliers. Officials there are also in the process of building a new water treatment plant and airport.

The development is all part of Thomasville Mayor Sheldon Day's plan to transform Thomasville and surrounding rural cities on U.S. 43 between Mobile and Tuscaloosa into "Alabama's Metals Corridor." All told, Day said, a total of about \$300 million is being poured into the area over the next few years, bringing with it more than 600 new jobs.

"This is life-changing for the community," he said.

With many areas of rural Alabama stuck in the worst recession of a generation, Thomasville's could provide a blueprint for success in similar areas.

The Thomasville plan, as Day tells it, includes understanding your community's strengths and weaknesses, regional cooperation, a focus on education and quality of life, getting community buy-in, and most importantly, not trying to be something you're not.

For Thomasville, that last part meant officials stopped serving fancy food and throwing swanky parties when visiting corporations came to town, and instead had back-yard barbecues with sweet tea and banana pudding.

"That rural Southern culture is something people long for, especially in the rat race of the modern world," Day said. "Southern communities have an opportunity to take their rural-ness and make it into something unique.

"If we can do it, 60 miles from the interstate and 100 miles from the closest big city, anybody can."

### **A railroad town**

Thomasville was founded as a railroad town in the late 1800s and named after railroad financier Samuel Thomas. A Norfolk Southern railroad line connecting Mobile to Birmingham still runs right through the town.

For years, Day had tried to lure big industry to his city despite the fact that it was nowhere near a river or interstate, meaning distribution centers and other businesses that relied on barge or truck transportation were likely out.

Thomasville caught a break in 2007 when German steel giant ThyssenKrupp AG decided to build a \$5 billion carbon and stainless steel facility in north Mobile County.

The mill is right next to U.S. 43 and the Norfolk Southern line.

Day began looking for industries that would be drawn by the proximity to rail.

Steel was one such industry. With ThyssenKrupp to the south, and a Nucor Corp. steel mill north on U.S. 43 in Tuscaloosa, Day created the Metals Corridor plan.

The first success came in July 2010 with Lakeside Steel, a Canadian firm that makes steel pipes used in the oil and gas industry. The company is investing \$57.5 million and creating 280 jobs over three phases of the project.

Norfolk Southern was key to the deal, Day said, as the railroad company agreed to change its routes to allow Lakeside to ship its pipes south to Mobile, where it could change lines and be routed west to Houston, the epicenter of the oil and gas sector.

In 2011, Thomasville built on its metals fixation by enticing Metals USA to invest \$10 million and create 30 jobs. The Fort Lauderdale, Fla.- based company is a supplier for Lakeside, uncoiling raw steel from ThyssenKrupp and cutting it to exact specifications needed by the pipe maker.

### **Regional cooperation**

Thomasville isn't the only beneficiary of the Metals Corridor plan. Warren, Mich.-based SET Enterprises looked at sites in Thomasville for a steel processing center before deciding to build 25 miles to the south in Jackson, on a site with access to the Tombigbee River. The \$12 million facility will employ 40 people.

Chinese firm Golden Dragon initially selected Thomasville as the site for a \$100 million, 300-worker facility before deeming it too small for future expansions. Day helped the firm locate a much larger site a few miles away, in adjacent Wilcox County.

Even though the projects are outside Thomasville, Day said his city will still benefit from workers deciding to buy houses, go shopping or be entertained within its limits.

"One thing I can say truthfully is that we all compete, us and Jackson and Grove Hill," Day said. "We are at each others throats in high school football, but we've learned to put things aside for business. What's good for them is good for us."

Alabama's governors and congressional delegation have also been good to Thomasville, Day said. Former Gov. Bob Riley took phone calls at 2 a.m. to help secure the Lakeside deal, Day said.

The city also got help from a congressmen who didn't even represent its citizens, Day said. Birmingham Republican Spencer Bachus, for example, was instrumental in convincing Norfolk Southern to change its routes to help land the Lakeside deal.

### **Holistic approach**

Thomasville hasn't just been chasing multi-national companies, Day said. Its four industrial parks also house several local businesses that have grown, such as General Sheet Metal Inc. and D&S Supply Inc.

City leaders have also focused on improving the quality of life for citizens. The city spent about \$3 million building a town hall and civic center with a 500-person theater that hosts both local and traveling shows and musical events.

It created a redevelopment plan and formed public-private partnerships with developers.

Downtown was 80 percent vacant two decades ago, Day said, and now about 90 percent of the storefronts have businesses inside them. There are also about 40 downtown loft apartments that have some of the highest rents between Mobile and Tuscaloosa, he said.

It also revamped its city school system to try to improve its workforce and provide graduates with more vocational training. Several years ago, the high school and nearby Alabama Southern Community College teamed up to offer college-level classes to high school upperclassmen.

The college's welding program became so popular among students that it was threatening to shut out adults, Day said, so about three years ago the city found grant money to build a welding lab at the high school. The city pays the salary of the instructor, Jeff McCutcheon, and about 30 juniors and seniors take the two-year course.

McCutcheon said that to pass his class, students have to be able to pass the same kind of welding tests they would get on a job site. Some of his graduates have immediately gotten jobs at places like Lakeside, the former Atlantic Marine shipyard in Mobile, ThyssenKrupp and Birch Mechanical in Lincoln, Ala.

"Some kids here don't have the opportunity to go to college and spend \$80,000 on a degree," he said. "Some of these kids are coming out of high school now earning \$40,000, and they've got a job for life."

Day said the school system is going to implement a similar vocational program next year for nursing, and has plans for an information-technology track in the future, too.

### **Future is bright**

Day said he believes Thomasville's window to attract investment is still open.

Having processors like SET and Metals USA could draw other companies that need steel cut for

them, he said.

Lakeside, SET and Metals USA create piles of scrap steel, so a steel recycler would be a natural next step.

And all the industrial facilities will need supplies of electrical components, lubricants and other things to keep running.

"We used to get about four or five (economic development) visits a year," he said. "After Lakeside, we got 50 in a year."

Day said he will be making several announcements about new retail developments this spring, and believes developers will spend more than \$50 million over the next two years on retail and entertainment projects in his city. He also has meetings set up with developers from Atlanta who want to build high-end apartments and single-family homes.

Officials are also at work on a \$26.5 million water treatment facility and a new \$20 million regional airport to help service the new development. Both should be complete within the next two years, he said.

### **It takes a village**

None of the city's success would be possible had the people of Thomasville not been on board, Day said. One of the things that impressed Golden Dragon officials was that the 50 people cooking, cleaning and serving at the reception the city held for them were all volunteers.

"Rural, Southern cities have an under-utilized asset," he said. "Little old ladies in the community who love to cook."

Residents also helped the city every time they agreed to cheap land options so that state officials could market their properties to industrial clients.

For example, Lakeside officials settled on a site that the city did not yet control. Day said they told him they needed to know the next day whether they could buy it, or they were moving on.

That night, Day had a heart scare during a city council meeting and had to be rushed to a hospital in Mobile. The whole time he was being prepped for surgery, he said, he was typing away on his cell phone to get the deal done. The next morning, he woke up with the deal done and a nurse asking him what the black thing was hidden under his leg.

"I'm probably the first person to go into surgery with a Blackberry snuck in behind my back," he said.

### **Banana pudding**

Day said that when he first became mayor in 1996, he would try to show visiting corporate officials that Thomasville was just as sophisticated as the bigger cities they were visiting.

But over the years he said he gained more confidence in his rural town, and now when people visit he gives them "a big dose of Thomasville."

With Golden Dragon, the city filled up a banquet table with a mixture of Chinese food and old-fashioned Southern cooking. The first thing to be devoured was the banana pudding, Day said.

"We don't do a function now without banana pudding," he said.

Day also recalls hosting Lakeside President Ron Bedard when the company had narrowed its choices for a site down to Thomasville and Houston.

A Thomasville resident volunteered to have a cook-out in his backyard, and Bedard and Day sat on the porch drinking wine while steaks cooked on the grill. Day recalls Bedard asking what Southerners called it -- a cookout? A barbecue?

"I told him that we call it porch-sitting," Day said. "To this day, I'll get emails from him saying, 'I could sure use a little of that porch-sitting after the week I had.'"